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THE FACE

E X P O S E D

MORE TRUE
STORIES:

DAVID BYRNE
IN THE FACE INTERVIEW

AT SIXTY
MILES DAVIS IS
WRESTLING WITH
HIS OWN PAST

THE TROUBLE
WITH ECSTASY

32-PAGE FASHION
SUPPLEMENT

UTFO/FULL FORCE/REAL ROXANNE
THE STRANGE WORLD OF ARTHUR TRESS
JEUNES SANS FRONTIERES/IAIN BANKS
WAS NOT WAS/SPIELBERG'S NEW MOVIE

DAVID BYRNE photographed by Ken Nohom



DAVID BYRNE

By Elissa Van Poznak/Photograph George Hurrell

RECALL, IF YOU WILL, *Starman*, John Carpenter's greatly underrated 1984 movieable. As a rock'n'roll-loving alien, Jeff Bridges crashlands onto Karen Allen's Kansas carpet, adopts humanoid form and local garb (a lumberjack shirt) and, in his mission to comprehend Humankind, drives across America issuing hesitant queries. "Define Bozo? Define Love?"

Well, today, in a quiet Kensington hotel, David Byrne is that alien. And if only the retentive 33-year-old leader of Talking Heads could be so easily explained.

First to be considered is Byrne's first serious cinematic endeavour, the visually bewitching *True Stories* (opening in late October) in which the still gawky but now greying Head drives across Texas in a red convertible and a Ten-Gallon Hat pointing at strange objects and defining confidently.

Then there's the accompanying book of the film (also called *True Stories*) in which Byrne reveals that his movie "deals with stuff that's too dumb for people to have bothered to formulate opinions on". You

know the stuff: cowgirls, shopping malls and parades.

Then there are two new albums full of Byrne's usual homespun homilies. The first — out now and titled "True Stories" — is Talking Heads' new LP while the second — a soundtrack album featuring the original cast — comes later.

And all of this has to be squared with the gaunt and apparently genuine figure who, during the interview, gazes out of the window uttering remarks of often stunning banality in an ingenuous gollygee-whillikers wimper — a man who, according to bass player Tina Weymouth in a new book about the band, wrote their most famous composition, "Psycho Killer", as an Alice Cooper song. "But, since he always does everything wrong, got it different."

Can this Byrne be the same as the one worshipped by art-heads and ethnically-sound hipsters the world over? Byrne, born in Dumbarton, Scotland in 1952 and raised in Baltimore, Maryland by working-class parents, is clearly one weird alien. But what if we met the alien and he wasn't as smart as he looked?

EVP: Tell us a true story that wasn't in your new movie, *True Stories*?

DB: (Long silence)

... I had one for a while about a man who used to send off the local football team everytime they played out of town. He'd go to the airport with a record player, plug it in as they were getting on the plane, play their theme song and give them a personal send off.

Then, after a while (Byrne pronounces it *hu-wile*) the town — it was Baltimore — couldn't afford the team anymore, so they moved elsewhere and this poor guy was left with nothing to support. (Laughing) That was a real sad one.

Previewing *True Stories* at the Edinburgh Festival (to an audience that included a coachload of relatives and Byrne's parents) — was this some kind of romantic notion of returning to the homeland and making good?

Yeah, yeah. It was kind of like that. The film



David Byrne, Tina Weymouth,
Chris Frantz, Jerry Harrison



was pretty well received and they really enjoyed the event. Jim, the Film Festival organiser had my family, 35-40 of them, all stand up. They got a big round of applause.

■ You spent a long time editing the film then tried to ban the press from seeing it at Edinburgh. Was that your final cut?

Oh yes. The only thing we might do now is a better job on the way the final credits roll. Some sound and colour could be better. But no more cutting.

■ You had so many roles on this project – script and songwriter, narrator, stills photographer, director. Can you isolate the most difficult aspect?

■ Hmmmm. Hmmmm. (*Time passes...*) Can't think of any one thing.

■ So, contrary to received wisdom, making a feature movie is easy?

■ Some of it was. Some of it was, well, not easy but not as stressful as I'd been led to believe. It was a real good production team and cast which made for a real friendly community.

■ Did you originally intend to appear in the film?

■ I was trying to find a way to weasel out of it. You were once quoted as saying that you only ever felt comfortable onstage. Were you anxious about acting onscreen with a first-time director, namely yourself?

■ I just felt that somebody had to do that role or something had to serve the function of bridging and introducing scenes and leading you into the film but it didn't necessarily have to be me. I think it worked but I think somebody else could have done it just as well.

■ But not so personally?

■ Probably not. I guess there is something to the fact that people know that not only am I introducing it but I'm

the one who's chosen what to show.

■ And then you make flatly ironic or comic statements which people aware of your past with Talking Heads would get an extra flip from. I'm thinking of your comment about having had something important to say about European and American architecture, but you left it at home.

■ (*Amused*) Uh huh. Although that's kind of funny on its own.

■ How involved were you with the various processes of filming?

■ I worked with the casting person, and some of the people we got really quickly. The Lying Woman (Jo Harvey Allen) – I'd seen her do her own stage monologues about growing up in Lubbock, Texas. Spalding Grey (who plays Computer Corporation bigwig Mr. Culver) had a small part in *The Killing Fields* but is best known as a monologist. He sits behind a desk and tells very revealing stories about his sexual experiences, his relationship with his parents, what he's feeling. He does it in a funny and entertaining way. John Goodman (the film's unlikely hero, Louis Fyne, who sports a "consistent panda bear shape" and advertises for a wife), I only saw him in a couple of small films though he was in the Broadway musical *Big River*.

■ Did the actors conform to physical type as envisaged on your own storyboards?

■ Yeah – a lot of them were cast to fit the

drawings but I don't like to say that too often because it must be an odd feeling to hear that you, as an actor, have been cast because you look like a sketch that I did. Then of course, we make'm over, put wigs on them. John, when he read, had bushy, curly hair. We kind of darkened and coloured and combed it more like I imagined.

■ You say, in the *True Stories* book, that you're both laughing at and admiring the kind of American audacity that can create a shopping mall big enough to house a lake complete with sharks and submarines. Laughing and admiring, is this your general tone?

■ If I had to say what the film is about, that's what it's probably about.

■ Yet in the movie you seem to rue the loss of the "funky old parts of town" for the metal prefabs and the shiny new shopping malls – even though the real life vox-pops in the film seem to prefer them.

■ My natural instinct is to like the older parts of town better but part of what I'm saying is, 'hey, it's my natural instinct but maybe we can learn from these people'. They'll go wherever the bargains are. They don't have in-built biases about something being nice and aged and old. They'll use it however they find it. Part of making the film is the process for me of learning from their attitudes.

■ "Love For Sale", one of the soundtrack songs (a punkish number which in the film heralds a hilarious video sequence featuring chocolate-coated Talking Heads) begins with the line: "I was born in a house with the television always on". Aren't you, as an artist, albeit one who successfully uses the medium, alarmed by the vast amount of Americans reared and educated by TV.

■ To me, it's a challenge to try and appreciate these people for the world they live in. They chose it and somehow they make it work. You can't complain about what's been lost – culture and all other kinds of history – because they seem to be content. So why complain about it?

■ MTV recently awarded you a 'Vanguard Award', acknowledging your innovative video work, some of which resides – such as "Road To Nowhere" and "Once In A Lifetime", in the Museum Of Modern Art's permanent collection.

■ I watch MTV occasionally. I think that's the way most people watch it. Tune in for a little before going to sleep, watch it for 20 minutes or so, get fed up and turn it off. It's disposable but that's what's good about it – it endlessly repeats; you can tune in anytime and it's exactly the same. You don't have to adjust your schedule to it. Normal television, if you want to watch a drama you have to be in front of the TV at a given hour.

■ You don't think that some people make their schedule by MTV?

■ Gee. I don't know anybody that does.

■ Does 'art' turn America off?

■ Oh yeah. If something is called Art, people become very pious, treat it with religious respect. It can't be fun which is a shame. Takes a lot of life out of it.

■ Is your work 'art' or 'product'?

■ I feel I'm successful when I combine both together, when people forget the distinction between the two. If I can do a video which can be artistically successful and still get shown on TV, then I've got the best of both worlds.

■ At art school did you ever imagine being in a globally famous band, capable of selling millions of albums?

■ You always want to be popular, want people

to hear what you've done. We didn't set out with a masterplan to kind of figure out how to do that. The odds of making a living from it were pretty slim but I'd be behold to get noticed pretty early on so we stuck with it and a lot of other things fell by the wayside.

■ Such as your career as a visual artist?

■ Gradually, in the last few years, I've been able to integrate that a little more into things.

■ The director Mary Lambert (a contemporary of Byrne's at Rhode Island School of Design) described that era there – the early Seventies – as being "turbulent, teachers didn't know what to teach, painting was dead".

■ That may be true. I know when I was there and at another school after, I figured that a degree in fine art was pretty useless in terms of guaranteeing a job so I figured I'd get my money's worth and kept switching majors every semester. Six months it would be video, then I might be a photography major for another six months or I'd be in the painting studio. It was pretty good. I guess what you learn is that the creative process is the same no matter how you apply it. All you need is the technical know-how.

■ Is there a consistent pattern to your work?

■ Well, yes. I think I'm starting to recognise it. I kind of instinctually regurgitate stuff which I don't know what to make of – it might be a lot of images and newspaper stories – which gradually I take a more cold eye to and pull into some kind of form. I do the same thing with songs – spit out a lot of words. If it happens to be from a character's point of view or something, then you write down everything from that point of view, then figure out how to make it rhyme, then organise it into verses and choruses.

■ Being so prolific, don't you find that you're repeating yourself?

■ I think the fact that I switch to different media disguises the fact that I'm often saying the same thing and people don't notice it so quickly – it being said in different forms.

■ This suggests that you're hung up over various things.

■ I think that might be true. I hope not, but it might be.

■ Have you ever been in analysis?

■ No.

■ Do you feel it might have a vampiric effect on your creativity?

■ I never thought of that – it might be true. I never went because my assumption was that you went because you have a problem. I always felt, well, not always but most of the time, that I'm coping with life fairly well. And then other people have told me that, no, you don't have to think of yourself as ill, but it's there as a service, you can just kind of talk to somebody. If it helps straighten out in your mind what you're about then that seems okay though I haven't done it.

■ You say in *True Stories* (the book) that "Songs don't necessarily advance the storyline (but) they give relatively placid people – like you or me – a justification for expressing themselves and exposing their insides to everybody else in town". Yet the real David Byrne resolutely hides behind personae or uses an ironical smokescreen in Talking Heads songs. Which must be intentional...

■ Yeah I guess so... I find it pretty hard to commit myself to something... a point of view in a song; not to commit myself exactly, but in saying what I believe in a song. Probably because I know that one week later I can feel differently about it. So it would be pretty stupid for me to say 'this is how I feel'.

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You're indecisive?

I don't think it's being indecisive, it's trying to see things from more than one point of view. To see all sides of the situation, most people can do that if they want.

Yet you constantly make artistic choices.

That's different.

How? Whatever you do there's always alternatives, possibly better, way of doing it.

Then you do it next time, next year.

If you interpret this idea visually — losing perspective and seeing all angles at once — you come up with something approaching naïve, primitive art. Not unlike the eccentric cover of your last album "Little Creatures". How did you find the artist, Rev. Howard Finster?

I saw some things he'd done. He is a Reverend though I think the church kicked him out after he got a little carried away in some of his sermons. His other paintings were fantastic and funny at the same time and people who'd met him said that although he concentrated on his visionary paintings he was real open and might do something on commission. So I sent him some snapshots of the band.

Not in white Y-fronts presumably?

No (laughing). That was his idea. I don't know where that came from. But I told him that for it to be a record cover, his painting had to be square and he did it to order. Sure did a great job.

Did religion figure in your upbringing?

I was dragged to church for a while but I figure it didn't take hold. I still have an interest and respect for religion though most of them are outdated now, rituals made up centuries ago which don't move people as they used to. I think that's why people believe in flying saucers and movies like *ET*.

Would you like to believe in alien lifeforms?

Yeah, I'd like to. I'd like to believe that there's life out there maybe wiser than us. I'd like to believe that but I don't really and chances are we'll never meet them. Or, like I said in one of the book captions, we might see them and never know it. They might be gaseous clouds. We might not know they were intelligent.

What if they were stupider than us?

That would be a real disappointment. It might be like that book *Being There*. They might be stupider but we may want so badly to believe that they're smarter than us that we treat them as superior.

So what do you believe in? TV, the power of advertising, the goodness of people?

Yeah, those are pretty tangible things.

Did you ever consider a career in advertising?

I'd love to do commercials. From what I hear they're a lot of fun. But I gather that the way they're done, often the director will have a whole committee of people commenting and making decisions about the model's hairstyle. I don't think that it happens in the better British or Japanese commercials but it certainly happens in American ones. The standards are watered down.

Having worked with Brian Eno, Robert Wilson, Twyla Tharp and Talking Heads to name but four, you seem to have little trouble collaborating.

I think I still retain a lot of veto power so I end up with the final say on the collaboration. It's like a gift. You get all these ideas and input

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from people, approaches you wouldn't have thought of yourself and then accept or reject it. Sometimes, divisions are clearer than other times. The thing I did with Robert Wilson (*The Knee Plays*, part of his *Civil Wars* trilogy), I got involved with casting and some set building. Lighting and staging were done by him.

So, what stimulates you to write songs or plan your next movie?

I don't really have a good answer. I get a gut feeling. That sounds kind of dumb. Right now, probably for the next few months, I don't have anything planned.

You don't have a puritanical drive to produce work?

I do but now I know that, once I know what I want to do, I can do it. I think I know enough not to jump in just for the sake of producing something.

Was there a period when you did that?

Yeah, I didn't get too digged into it but there was a period when we were closer to being on the treadmill of making a record, touring, making a record. Three or four years ago.

You were becoming a rock and roll band?

Which is fine but ... and it's a fun way to make a living but, it gets tired after a while.

Having to perform "Psycho Killer" for the Nth time?

Yeah, so every time we went out we did it in another style. The way it was done in *Stop Making Sense*, acoustic style was pretty much the way I first wrote it. It kind of came full circle so it was tolerable.

Did that film (made by Jonathan Demme and generally regarded as the best live concert film ever made) close a chapter for Talking Heads?

The whole band feels, I think, that we can't do that performance or any of those moves anymore. We put it in a time capsule so we now have to think of different ways to present things onstage.

What did you observe, working with Demme at such close hand?

He seemed to be in amazingly good spirits all the time and has a real generous attitude towards people which was inspiring. I didn't know what to expect, I was impressed that nothing ever seemed to get him down even when we were shooting at nights and in the daytime he was being forced to re-edit and reshoot scenes from his movie *Swingshift* against his will.

Philip Garner, the inventor of the *Better Living* Catalog and also a lover of American leisure culture, contributed to *True Stories*.

Yeah, I called him up and we sat down and talked through a lot of his suggestions seemed too elaborate to actually do.

Such as?

One idea for the climax of the movie was a drive-in movie set and a lighthouse comes out of the middle with a beacon turning round and projecting an image on the screen. That just seemed ... a little beyond our budget. Much cheaper to have a girl walking down a road.

Texas is so ideal for *True Stories* that it's surprising to learn that you didn't write the script with that location in mind.

Yeah. My original impulse to go have a look

followed a suggestion that it was cheaper to work there than in LA or New York and after I had a look I couldn't think of any place better that seemed to embody what I was getting at. So I adapted things — not the characters but things like the little historical introduction and the whole celebration that seemed to coincide with the Texas sesquicentennial. So that was a handy way to tie our fictional talent show in to a real event. Virgil, the town in the film, is really an amalgamation of a number of towns. For the main street parade we filmed in McKinney, 30 miles north of Dallas.

The *True Stories* songs are a motley collection in style and subject. How did they come together?

Well, I did them pretty early after I had some basic scenes and characters and I wrote them to order. A song like "People Like Us", written to express what I imagine Louis Fyne would say in a style he'd like (country and western), was pretty easy. That song might have taken a few days though it wasn't until the third attempt that the music and words and spirit seemed to gel, whereas if I was writing something for Talking Heads, if something didn't work out, I'd just chuck it away and abandon it. In this case I had to fill a space in a film so the song at the end had to evoke a certain mood ("City Of Dreams") and the one in the video club ("Wild Life") had to sound like an ordinary pop song. I had to keep trying to get it to sound ordinary enough.

Some seemed a little surprised when Talking Heads went country on "Little Creatures", say on "Creatures Of Love" yet it's a form, romantic, naïve, even corny, that suits you.

Yeah, I listen to country stations all the time though now I listen mostly to Latin, Cuban and Brazilian stuff. Contemporary pop is just around in the air and you kind of absorb it just by walking down the street and overhearing it coming out of a car radio or a shop. You don't have to actively seek it out.

Now you've made the transition to the big screen, are you ready to direct your next feature?

Not really. It'll happen real slowly. My next thing I think should not be a musical and should be based on some classic story. I'm really at the beginning stages but I just reread the epic of Gilgamesh, one of the oldest stories in existence from 2000BC or something. I'd update it, set it in the modern day. Even though the schizoid/livewire David Byrne of "Psycho Killer" dates back to 1977 and you've become more accessible in recent years, are you aware that this reputation for being strange and awkward has stuck?

I notice this stuff later on. It's broken down a little but I wasn't aware of it at the time.

Were your *True Stories* coworkers intimidated by your reputation?

I think I remember somebody being a little nervous but they got over it pretty quick.

So, in retrospect, can you see how you've arrived at this point?

Well, I can see that I'm more accepting than I used to be. I've arrived at being able to like things.

Such as?

Metal buildings. I can like things I found disgusting or a waste of time without having compromised.

David Byrne finally gets integrated?

Yeah, I guess so. I think I'm kind of settling into it. Ought to be by now. ●